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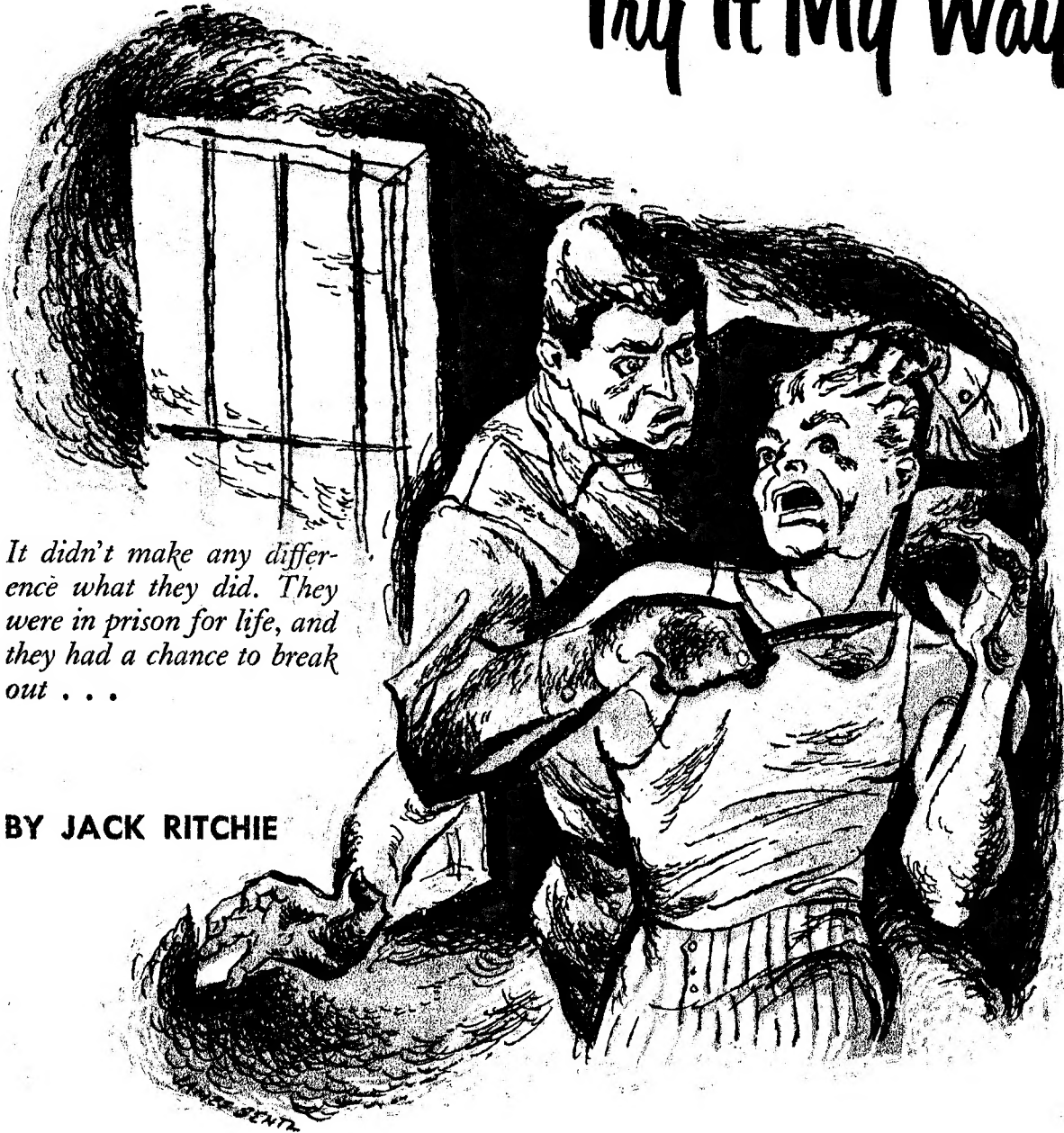
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Try It My Way



It didn't make any difference what they did. They were in prison for life, and they had a chance to break out . . .

BY JACK RITCHIE

AT FOUR O'CLOCK they thought of shutting off the water. I took the half-filled saucepan out of the sink and poured it into one of the big cookpots lined up on the floor.

Keegan stopped fooling with the

automatic long enough to pour me a glass of vanilla extract from the quart bottle.

I took a couple of swallows and wiped my mouth on my sleeve. Then I pulled the bill of the guard

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cap lower and walked to the other end of the kitchen.

They were both in their underwear. Brock sat cross-legged, staring at the backs of his big hands without interest, and Stevens hugged his legs tight to his chest, his eyes trying not to look up at me.

I grinned. "Here we got two types," I said. "Notice the nice gray hair, the clear healthy skin, and them baby blue eyes on Stevens."

Turk was at the big window keeping an eye on the exercise yard. He turned his head. "A real nice grandpop. I remember the twinkle in his eye when he used his stick on my kidneys."

"Watch this, Turk," I said. I reached down and put my hand on Stevens' shoulder. He shrank away and began trembling.

Turk laughed. "That's good to see. I'm glad I lived so long."

"Stevens is remembering all the little things he used to do to make life interesting for us," I said. "And now he's scared silly that we got better imaginations."

I shifted my smile to Brock. "Now this here boy's got no imagination at all. He's got free hand but he can't think of the clever things like Stevens can."

Brock met my eyes. "I'm thinking of some now, Gomez."

I grinned at him a long time and then I went to the window.

The guards were in a straggling arc around the three sides of the messhall wing. Some of them were

standing, but most were taking it easy, hunkered on their heels and waiting for the warden to think of something.

I went back to my chair. "Keegan," I said. "I'll tell you about Davis. You're too young in here to remember him."

I lit a cigarette and exhaled smoke. "Davis was afraid of cats. Crazy afraid about them and everybody knew it. And one day he made the mistake of using disrespectful words to Stevens and he got tossed into the hole."

I put my feet on the table. "Davis had one peaceful day and then he began screaming. Real interesting screaming and it was all about how there was a cat in the hole with him."

Keegan took the clip out of the automatic and examined it.

"After a couple of hours, Davis suddenly didn't make any more noise. When somebody bothered to wonder about that and take a look, he found Davis had beat his brains out against the wall."

I looked at Stevens. "In one of the corners was a black as spades cat licking his paws. Now I wonder how he could of got in there."

Turk turned away from the window. "The warden's waving a hanky and he's coming around to the main door."

Keegan got up and went into the dining hall and I could hear his footsteps as he made his way through the emptiness of it. He began mov-

ing some of the tables and benches away from the double doors.

There would be guards in the corridor, but they wouldn't try to force their way in as long as we had Brock and Stevens with us.

In five minutes, Keegan returned with Warden Cramer.

Cramer's eyes went to Brock and Stevens.

"They're doing just fine, warden," I said. "But they might be a little chilly."

His eyes moved to the uniform I was wearing and his mouth tightened. "This isn't going to get you anywhere, Gomez," he said.

"Tell us what we got to lose, warden," I said. "I'm the short-timer here and I got ninety years to wait."

He shifted his attention to Keegan. "For one thing, you got your lives to lose if anything happens to Brock or Stevens."

Keegan sipped his glass of extract and smiled at him.

"All right," Cramer snapped. "Let's have what you expect from me."

"A nice fast car and an open gate," Keegan said.

The warden's eyes were hard. "It wouldn't do you much good. You couldn't get far."

"We'll have Brock and Stevens along to show us the way," Keegan said. "Something clever should come to us when it gets dark."

Cramer walked over to Stevens and Brock. "They haven't tried

anything rough on you, have they?"

"Just words," Brock said.

Cramer came back to us. "You have one hour to give this up."

I smiled. "And if we don't, warden? Are you going to try what you haven't got nerve enough to do now?"

Cramer's face colored angrily.

"Remember," I said. "Keep it quiet and orderly out there. If you come for us, start thinking of words to use for Stevens' widow."

Keegan took the warden back out and while he was gone I searched through the kitchen drawers until I found a whetstone. I began sharpening the nine-inch meat knife I carried.

When Keegan came back, he refilled our glasses.

Brock uncrossed his legs and rubbed circulation back into them. "Before that stuff goes to your head, Keegan, do some thinking. If Cramer lets you three get away with this, there won't be a guard safe in the country. He's not going to let that happen."

"Start hoping you're wrong," Turk said. "Work on it real hard."

I got to my feet and went over to Stevens. "Maybe I should cut off a few ears and toss them out into the yard for Cramer to admire. It might impress him that we mean business."

I got down on one knee in front of him. "Whose ears should it be, Stevens? Yours or Brock's?"

Stevens licked his lips and tried to look away, but his eyes came back to

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the knife in my hand.

I grabbed a handful of his hair and jerked his head back. I put the tip of my knife under his jaw. "You got two seconds to make up your mind."

His voice was the strangled whisper of terror. "Brock. Make it Brock."

I let go of him and stood up. "See, Brock," I said. "He wants his ears real bad. He don't love you at all when it comes to that."

Keegan was watching me. "Did you get your thrill, Gomez?"

"Sure," I said. "I got a mean streak in me and it has to be fed."

Keegan lighted one of the cigars we'd found in Brock's uniform and took Turk's place at the window.

I went back to the table and sat down. "With Davis it was cats," I said. "With some people it's the dark or maybe high places."

I watched Turk pouring himself a drink. "I'm thinking of the time the drier in the laundry flared up," I said. "Just a short in the wiring and nothing to get excited about. Remember the size of Stevens' eyes when he thought he might get burned?"

I picked up a pack of bookmatches and lit one. I let it burn low and Turk watched it. When I blew it out, Turk took the pack and went over to Stevens.

Turk stood there grinning and then he tore one of the matches out of the pack and lit it.

Stevens' eyes got wide and he backed away as he watched it burn.

"Let him alone, Turk," Keegan said from the window.

"All I want is a little fun," Turk said. "I got it coming."

Keegan came away from the window. "I just told you something, Turk."

Turk met his eyes for a few moments and then he shrugged and walked away.

"Gomez, the idea man, and Turk, the pupil," Brock said. "You got nice company, Keegan."

"Stevens is with you," Keegan said. "Want to brag about him?"

Five o'clock passed and nothing happened. I relieved Keegan at the window and waved to the photographers who were behind the line of guards taking pictures.

The warden finished talking to a knot of reporters and then he started through the guards.

"Cramer's coming back," I said. "And he hasn't got a car under his arm."

Keegan left to let him in. When he came back with the warden, they took seats at the table.

"Well?" Keegan asked.

"You might as well quit this before somebody gets hurt," Cramer said. "You're not getting out of here and that's that."

"We're stubborn and we think different," Keegan said. He glanced at the wrist watch he'd taken from Brock. "We're not going to drag this out until there's snow in hell. It's ten after five right now. We'll give you until seven."

"It's out of my hands," Cramer said. "I talked to the governor and he says positively nothing doing."

"You got almost two hours to change his mind," I said.

"You know what will happen if you let anything happen to Brock or Stevens. You'll all be held equally responsible." Cramer's eyes went around the three of us and settled on Keegan. "You got sense enough to know that this won't work."

Keegan smiled thinly. "I'm the outdoor type and I been in here six years. Don't count on me being able to think clear."

The warden got up. "Seven o'clock is going to come and go. It's not any special time on my clock."

He looked at the pots of water. "We can wait a long time out there. Longer than that will last."

When he was gone, Keegan sat at the table slowly smoking his cigar. It was quiet except for the sounds the guards made as they talked to each other in the yard.

At six, Turk took my place at the window. I refilled my glass and lit a cigarette. "Cramer's got the notion that we don't have the guts to do like we say. I vote to build a fire under Stevens. He should get loud enough for even the governor to hear."

I let a whole book of matches flare up and tossed it at Stevens.

He shrieked as he skittered away from it. His face got pasty white and twitched with fright as he crouched in the corner watching me.

Keegan got up. "I thought I said words about doing things like that."

I glanced up. "Not to me."

"You're getting told now."

I looked at the bigness of his shoulders and the way his hands hung, ready to use.

I picked up the knife and smiled. "We'll leave it at your way for now. When it gets past seven we can argue about it."

At six-thirty the dusk began pushing into the room. Keegan went to the light switch and tried it. Nothing happened.

It was quarter to seven when the floodlights in the yard were turned on. Inside the kitchen pillars of light leaned against the windows.

Seven o'clock came and passed.

At ten after, I finished the last of the vanilla extract and threw the glass at the sink. "Now let's do it my way," I said. "Let them listen to Stevens die and they'll find us a car real fast."

Cellophane crackled as Keegan unwrapped another cigar. "Stop smacking your lips over Stevens and start thinking."

I sat on the edge of the table and began flipping the knife at the piece of light that lay over one corner of it and waited.

"Let's look at this thing with brains," Keegan said. "The party's over. We've had it."

I kept playing with the knife and neither Turk nor I said anything.

Keegan went on. "Like Brock said, if we get away with it here, the

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same thing will be tried in every pen in the country. That's why Cramer's not going to let it happen."

"He'll have to," I said. "If we do it my way. We give them one body. That makes them know we got nothing more to lose. We can burn only once and it'll be no cost to us to give them another corpse if they don't do like we say."

Keegan reached for his glass and then saw that it was empty. He pushed it away. "Use that beautiful imagination of yours now, Gomez. Suppose even that doesn't work. Start thinking about the hot seat."

Brock spoke from the darkness. "I watched a dozen of them take the walk. Ask me how scared they were."

I looked toward Brock and Stevens. They were in the shadows, but I knew they were watching and hoping.

Turk broke the silence. "It's not going to be a happy time for us when Brock and Stevens put on their uniforms again."

"I'm not looking forward to it either," Keegan said. "But it's better than frying."

There was another long quiet and then Turk sighed. "That part about being alive persuades me."

Keegan's face came into the light as he leaned forward. "Make it unanimous, Gomez."

Brock spoke again. "It's something to see when they turn on the juice. They jump against the straps like the devil was burning inside of them. They're supposed to be dead

in a second, but it don't look like that to me, Gomez. Not when they fight it like that."

I stuck the knife into the table. "I'm finished," I said. "Just like you are."

Keegan relaxed back into his chair. "First I finish this cigar. It'll be a long time before I taste another one."

And then I saw it.

I whirled toward the window and it was there on the sill, a small silhouette against the light.

I whipped off my cap and smashed at it again and again until it was a broken stain on the stone.

"Jesus!" Turk said sharply. "You scared the hell out of me, jumping up like that. It wasn't nothing but a little cockroach."

Another floodlight flashed on outside and a slant of light cut across the room and fell on Stevens.

Iciness gripped at my insides. Stevens knew about them now and I knew what he was thinking about. He knew what I was afraid of. When we were back in our cells he'd know what to do to me.

I jerked the knife out of the table and went after him.

Keegan shouted and moved forward, but he was too late to stop me.

Keegan pulled at me, but I didn't let go of Stevens until I was through.

Keegan looked down at the body and then his eyes met mine.

"All right, Gomez," he said quietly. "Now we got no choice. We try it your way."